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ABSTRACT

Few efforts have been made to systematically examine the impact of self-perception on the perceptions of others. To explore the extent to which the attributions made by a perceiver about another person are related to the perceiver's self-attributions, 93 white and 71 black college students were asked to engage in a 20-minute conversation with a partner. They were then asked to describe themselves and the partner in terms of an adjective scale. Results indicated that, in this context, the ways in which individuals perceived each other were related to the ways in which they perceived themselves, although the results did not imply that how the self was perceived was responsible for how others were perceived. The findings indicate that perceptions may have been influenced by the race and sex of the participants. (JAC)

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INTERPERSONAL PERCEPTION IN CONVERSATIONAL INTERACTIONS AS A FUNCTION OF SELF-PERCEPTION

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Interpersonal Perception in Conversational Interactions as a Function of Self Perception[1]

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There is an exceedingly rich theoretical and research literature concerned with the perception of others and, to a lesser extent, the perception of self. An excellent general review of the relevant literature has been presented by Shneider, Hastorf, and Ellsworth (1979), an earlier and somewhat broader review was published by Taguiri (1969), and a relatively brief discussion of the major nonverbal characteristics that appear to be involved in interpersonal perception has recently been offered by Feldstein (1982). However, very few efforts seem to have been made to examine directly and systematically the impact of self perception upon the perception of others, although the notion of such a relationship is intuitively reasonable and has received some indirect consideration. Cantor and Mischel (1977), for example, have suggested that information about traits and behavior is dynamically organized in terms of what they call "prototypes," or basic personality categories. Prototypes determine not only how such information is stored but also how it is processed. A very similar notion, that of "self-schemata," was proposed by Markus (1977), whose research seems to indicate that self-schemata play a role in the processing of information relevant to the self.

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Rogers (1974) and Kuiper (1981) and their colleague (Rogers, Kuiper, & Kirker, 1977) argue that the self may be viewed as a prototype and as such influences information about the self and others. If the notion of the self as a prototype has any viability, it must be the case that the perception of others is mediated by the characteristics of the perceiver's self. On the other hand, it is not clear that the characteristics are those that are accessible to, or acknowledged by, the perceiver.

Almost all personality theories posit that the personal characteristics of an individual play a role in his or her perception of other people. The theories vary considerably, however, in the extent to which they presume that the individual is aware of those determining characteristics. The concern of the study reported here was with the general question of whether interpersonal perception is related to self perception. The intent of the study was to explore the extent to which the attributions made by a perceiver about another person are related to the perceiver's self-attributions. More specifically, the study compared adjectival descriptions of the self with adjectival descriptions of each other provided by pairs of persons who have engaged each other in conversation. In other words, each participant in the study described, in terms of a set of bipolar adjective scales, not only his or her conversational partner, but also him- or herself.

Method

The participants in the study were 93 white and 71 black college students whose ages averaged 19.1 years (SD = 1.9 years). Of the white students, 41 were men and 52 were women; of the black students, 21 were men and 50 were women. Prior to their participation, the students were assembled into pairs, or dyads, that represented all possible combinations of race and gender. In none of the dyads did the members know each other more than slightly and in most, not at all.

Each pair of participants was brought into a comfortably furnished, sound-proofed and sound-damped room, and the participants were seated facing each. They were then asked to engage in a 20-minute conversation that might help them to become acquainted with each other. The experimenter left the room and returned after recording the final 15 minutes of their conversation. The participants were then shown into separate rooms, and each was asked to describe him- or herself and his or her conversational partner in terms of a set of 20 seven-point, bipolar adjective scales (Table 1).

The set of scales has been used in a number of earlier studies (Crown, 1982), and a group of independent raters had determined previously which pole of each scale was positive and which was negative.

After their completion of the scales, the participants were told about the purpose of the study and encouraged to ask any questions what occurred to them.

Results

A factor analysis and varimax rotation of the self attributions yielded three main factors. The first seemed to reflect interpersonal style in that the scales that loaded .50 or above on the factor were (in terms of their positive poles): considerate, kind, patient, accepting, and unselfish. Factor 2 seemed to reflect personal style, with the high-loading scales being warm, responsive, cheerful, and outgoing. Factor 3 was concerned with appearance in that it was defined by the scales, attractive, neat, and poised. The three self-perception factors were used as independent variables in 20 univariate multiple regression equations in which the dependent variables were the scores of the 20 scales that described how the conversational partners were perceived. The other independent variables in each of the equations were the race and gender of the perceiver and the perceived and their products, and the products of race and gender and the three self-perception factors.

The analyses revealed that those participants who viewed their interpersonal styles in more positive ways, i.e., who saw themselves as rather considerate, kind, patient, accepting, and urselfish tended also to view their partners in more positive ways, specifically, as more decisive, intelligent, interesting, cheerful, outgoing, adjusted, calm, neat, and poised. Those participants who viewed themselves as warm, responsive, cheerful, and outgoing (Factor 2) also described their partners in terms of the positive poles of 14 of the 20 scales, only 5 of which were the same as those just listed. However, Factor 2 interacted with the race and gender of the partners such that those participants who perceived themselves to be at the positive end of the Factor 2 scales, that is, who viewed their personal style in positive ways, tended to describe their white male partners as more candid than their black male partners but their white female partners as less candid than their black female partners. Similar, but much more exaggerated, perceptions of their partners were held by those who viewed themselves negatively with regard to Factor 2 scales. The latter participants also viewed their female partners as less intelligent, cheerful, and patient than their male partners, and their black partners as less accepting than their white partners. Those who viewed themselves negatively on Factor 1 also tended to perceive their female partners as less cheerful than their male partners. Those participants who perceived themselves to be attractive, neat, and poised (Factor 3) tended to describe their partners as more outgoing and candid than those who described themselves as relatively unattractive, slovenly, and self-conscious.

Finally, the zero-order correlation coefficients for corresponding self- and partner-perception scales were all statistically significant and ranged from .27 to .59 with an average (computed from z' transformations) of .42.

Discussion

The results indicate that, at least within the context of conversations between persons who were initially strangers, the ways in which the individuals perceive each other were related to the ways in which they perceived themselves. The perceptions also appear to have partially depended upon the gender of the perceiver and the perceived and, to a lesser extent, upon their race. Given that the information received by the participants about each other in their 20-minute interactions was likely to be considered inadequate and unverified, the value of such obvious information as gender and race and their stereotyped implications was probably enhanced. It is not clear that the relation that was found between the perception of another person and that of the self would be obtained if the perceiver and the perceived knew each other well. In such a case, it might be expected that the individuals' perceptions of each other would be based upon considerably more information about each other than is likely to be available to strangers or acquaintances.

Despite the title of this paper, the results do not imply that how the self is perceived is responsible for how others are perceived. The results are certainly consistent with theories about the self as a prototype that, in the absence of sufficient information, guides an individual's perception of other persons. They are also, albeit less directly, consistent with expectations generated by such cognitive and phenomenological theories as those of George Kelly (1955) and Carl Rogers (1959). On the other hand, they are not inconsistent with Bem's (1972) notion that individuals make inferences about themselves, i.e., learn about what they are like, from their behavior. It may well be that, in the present study, the participants' perceptions of themselves and their partners were inferred from their conversational interactions. Perhaps the most important implications of the results are that people tend to perceive themselves and

others in similar ways and that such similarity can be based upon characteristics that are accessible to, and acknowledged by, the perceivers.

It might be noted that three aspects of the study enhance its external validity. One is that it used all possible pairings of race and gender. A second aspect is that, unlike the usual paradigm of person-perception studies, in which a group of judges rate the same "stimulus" person or persons (usually a person or persons the judges have never met or even seen), the strategy of the present study used many "stimulus" persons with a single rater for each. Most important, perhaps, is that such a strategy and the fact that the ratings, or perceptions, are derived from actual interactions between the perceiver and the perceived, makes the experimental context very much like the "real life" context in which such perceptions are usually formed. Thus, although it can be argued that the relations between the partner and the self perceptions are a function of the paradigm used by the study, it can be argued more forcefully that the paradigm is more adequately representative of how interpersonal attributions are generally made outside of the laboratory.

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Table 1

Bipolar Adjective Scales

1. Decisive	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Indecisive
2. Unintelligent	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Intelligent
3. Boring	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Interesting
4. Warm	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Cold
5. Dependent	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Independent
6. Inconsiderate	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Considerate
7. Responsive	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Unresponsive
8. Mean	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Kind
9. Depressed	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Cheerful
10. Reserved	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Outgoing
11. Adjusted	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Maladjusted
12. Calm	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Excitable
13. Attractive	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Unattractive
14. Neat	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Slovenly
15. Poised	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Self-conscious
16. Sensitive	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Insensitive
17. Impatient	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Patient
18. Candid	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Secretive
19. Rejecting	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Accepting
20. Selfish	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Unselfish